

Northern Californians are understandably outraged by the record high gasoline prices we've experienced at the pump in recent months. High prices translate into real economic consequences for everyone, particularly those struggling to raise a family or run a farm or small business.

Today's problems are the result of a number of factors, including a growing international demand for oil and political strife abroad, which have caused petroleum prices to climb to record levels. While we cannot control these events, we can work to address the domestic energy policies and environmental laws that have, over time, prevented us from developing American-made energy and made it increasingly costly and difficult to meet our own needs. Put simply, we've tied our own hands.

Had President Clinton not vetoed legislation in 1996 to authorize exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, we could today be producing a million additional barrels of oil each day -- about the same we import from Castro-friendly Venezuela. We also have potentially abundant energy reserves off our coasts, but efforts to access them have been repeatedly stymied, keeping nearly 100 billion barrels of oil off limits. In turn, America's dependence on foreign oil has worsened. Today, we import two-thirds of our oil, compared to only one-third at the time of the 1970s Arab embargo.

Meanwhile, we haven't built a new refinery since 1976, due in large part to confusing and costly environmental regulations. Refinery production is no longer meeting domestic gasoline demand, increasing our dependence on foreign-refined gas. Recently, the House passed legislation to streamline these regulations, but even this modest effort has been blocked by environmental special interests. Further, federal regulations require seventeen different blends of gasoline, which inhibits the movement of excess fuel to areas where shortages occur, tightening supplies and putting further pressure on prices. Congress passed legislation to simplify these environmental mandates, but we must go further.

Energy security and environmental protection need not be an either-or proposition. 21st Century technology allows us to recover American energy resources in an environmentally safe way. It also enables us to produce gasoline that meets air quality goals and provides for America's fuel needs. In short, we can bolster America's energy supplies and responsibly protect our environment at the same time.

Alternative energy sources should be a part of the solution as well, but the free market -- not government mandates-- is the most efficient way to determine what technologies are developed and utilized. Still, the energy bill Congress passed last year provided substantial funding and incentives to encourage investment in alternatives sources. It also promoted energy efficiency so that we get more energy while using less.

Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet solution to lower gas prices overnight. The laws and policies that have gotten us here have been a long time in the making, and turning them around won't be swift or easy. But we must commit to doing so now to move toward energy independence and provide Americans a more secure energy future.